



Literacy Works

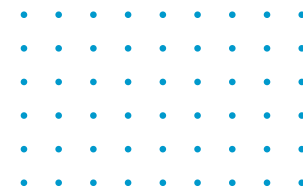
**Clear Language Lab**

# **Community Voices Project**

**2024 SNAPSHOT**

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# Introduction



Clear Language Lab is a program of Literacy Works, a Chicago-based non-profit, focused on two key areas:

- **Strengthening the adult literacy field** across Illinois and beyond
- **Making clear, effective communication the norm** in everyday systems using plain language practices

Formally launched in 2018, Clear Language Lab supports non-profits, government agencies, and other mission-driven organizations in prioritizing clear, effective communication at all levels within organizations.

Annually, we provide training, coaching, and consulting to nearly 1000 professionals from 200+ organizations. We work with groups across Illinois and around the country who represent a variety of sectors including healthcare, legal aid, workforce development, human services, and others.

All of this work is deeply grounded by the members of our Community Voices Project, which we launched in 2020. This report provides a snapshot of this aspect of our work in 2024.

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**At our core,  
we believe  
accessible  
communication  
is a  
critical tenet  
of a  
fair and just  
society.**

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# What is plain language — and why community voices matter

Plain language starts with a simple idea: information should be easy for people to **find, understand, and use** in everyday life.

Still, many of us have experienced challenges with everyday tasks like these:



Finding answers on a government website



Understanding what to do after a medical procedure



Following steps to pay a bill

What causes these types of communication issues? Common reasons we see often include:

- **We don't know what we don't know** (*I didn't realize that the vocabulary in the letter to clients was so unfamiliar. I need to rewrite it with that in mind.*)
- **Lack of training for staff around communication, accessibility, and technology tools** (*I didn't realize how easy it was to fix the issues with our e-newsletter.*)
- **Sticking with the status quo** (*We've always done it that way.*)
- **Unconscious bias** (*The images in our flyers don't feel inclusive to our community. Let's change that!*)
- **Systems that are "broken on purpose"** (*Our feedback form is buried on our website and people can't find it - or give us feedback!*)

For all of these reasons and more, we believe it is essential to incorporate perspectives of community members with lived experience.

**That's why we developed the Community Voices Project.**

# About the Community Voices Project

About once a month, we bring together our group members to discuss various aspects of our projects.

Participants have joined us through several ways:

- Through our adult education networks
- Through disability advocacy networks
- By word of mouth from current members
- Through other outside listening sessions

In 2024, **19 community members** participated in the Community Voices Project group. We:

- Retained 13 of 15 members (87%) from 2023 to 2024
- Welcomed 6 new members in 2024

Member retention is strong! Returning group members in 2024 have been with the group 2½ years on average:



4 years



3 years

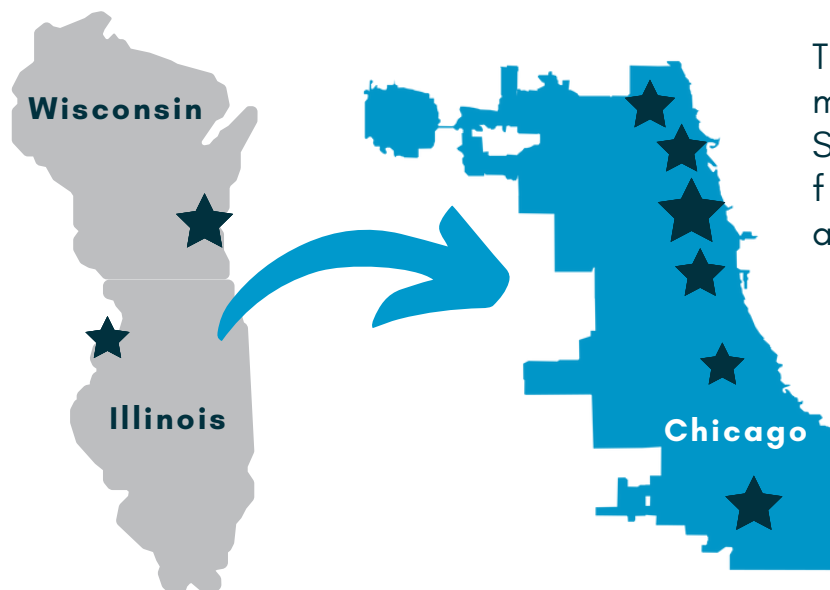


2 years



1 year

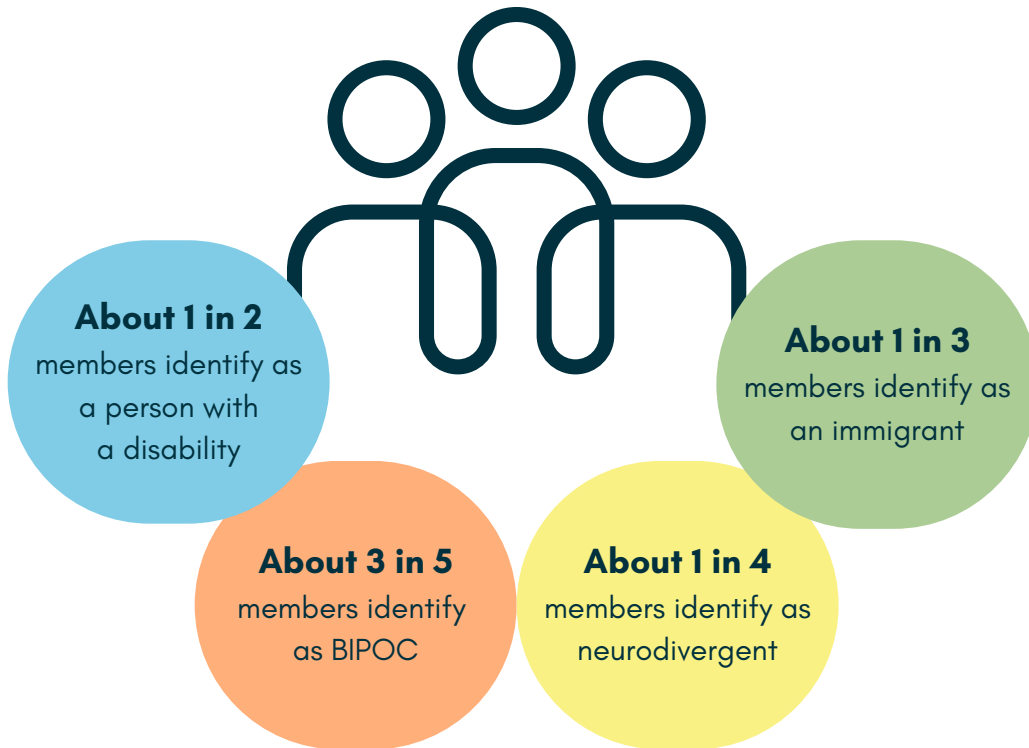
## Where current members live



The majority of our members live in Chicago. Some members join us from western Illinois and Wisconsin.

# More about our group members

We strive to create an environment that represents the rich diversity of our community. Here's how different groups are represented\* in the Community Voices Project:



## Why group members participate

We asked group members to choose the reasons that are most important to them. Here are the three most popular reasons:



Any time a member takes part in a group session or completes a survey, we provide a \$30 gift card to a store of their choice to show our appreciation for their time and energy.

*\*15 group members completed our 2024 survey.*

# **What our Community Voices members have to say...**



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## about the goal of our group:

We bring group members together virtually about once a month to discuss various projects that the Clear Language Lab is working on. We offer three different meeting options (morning, afternoon, and evening) to accommodate different schedules.

### In our recent survey, group members summed up what we do in the meet-ups in their own words:

"It's a group that is brought together to give ideas to enhance, clarify, simplify communication of written or visual information for a wide variety of possible consumers."

"The Community Voices group is a space where people from different backgrounds come together to share their opinions, stories, and experiences. Through these discussions, the group works on a variety of content to make it more accessible and understandable for different groups of people, creating positive change in their communities."

"...You get to create or give feedback on how to make the info more accessible to people with disabilities and those who don't speak English as their primary language."



# **What our Community Voices members have to say...**

## **about effective written communication:**

Our group meetings touch on a number of aspects of clear, effective writing – from word choice to organization to audience needs. We asked our group members what advice they have for those trying to use more plain language in their work.

### **How can someone make sure they are providing good written communication?**

“Simplify, simplify, simplify... look at the consumer and consider if they will understand the terms being used.”

“...I would recommend that they inform the public in a timely manner, in clear and understandable language to ensure that the information reaches the largest number of citizens...”

“Make the words a lot easier to understand.”

“We use acronyms a lot but we don’t define what the acronym actually means... when you write something out or pass out any type of literature that has lots of acronyms make sure you keep a page with all the acronyms and what they mean or write them on each page along with what it means.”





# **What our Community Voices members have to say...**

## **about having helpful conversations & presentations:**

### **How can someone better communicate in conversations and presentations?**

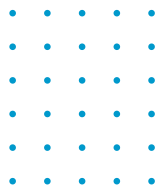
"Talk slowly, use words we can understand, be courteous."

"I would love for them to provide information beforehand for personal notetaking, such as a copy of the slides."

"Be more patient with people."

"Engage with your audience by encouraging questions, showing empathy, and using storytelling to create connections. Be transparent by clearly stating your message and next steps."

"Keep it short and to the point, read your audience. "



# Highlights from 2024

## NTEN Panel Presentation

In March 2024, group members Bob, Vincent, and Mary joined our Senior Program Manager, Sarah Glazer, on a panel at the annual Nonprofit Technology Conference. They talked about how our Community Voices group works and shared tips for organizations that want to create a similar group.

Bob, Vincent, and Mary shared that they enjoy being part of the group because it's a meaningful way to help their communities. They all expressed how important it is to write clearly and share accessible communications.

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## Project Impacts

This year, the Community Voices Project volunteers gave feedback and input on more than 10 Clear Language Lab projects, often touching on various aspects of projects including but not limited to...

- word selection for audience readability and understanding
- image and icon choice
- color selection
- usage of numbers and formulas
- tone
- and so much more...

Their shared lived experiences also help us to figure out how audiences might receive certain information and help us to anticipate possible questions and needs. We are grateful to have them as trustworthy expert partners in the work we do.

# Stay connected with us!

Visit [litworks.org](https://litworks.org) to:

- take part in our Community of Practice
- attend a training
- check out our resource library
- chat with us about your plain language needs and services we offer

## Connect with us

### Clear Language Lab at Literacy Works

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Special thank  
you to all the  
members of our  
Community  
Voices Project!

We are thrilled  
to partner with  
you all!